Scapegoating Mother Nature

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Body

I happen to live in a part of the country that has, of late, been especially hard hit by what are often called "natural" disasters.

This summer, the interior of British Columbia was ravaged by drought and forest fires, not to mention the insidious spread of a little beetle that seems intent on devouring the entire province.

Then, before anyone could even catch a breath, the drought turned into record flooding on the coast. As a result of these tumultuous events, thousands of people have been evacuated, hundreds have lost their homes, many have lost their jobs and a few have even lost their lives.
Special to The Telegram

It hasn't been a good year. So it's only natural for people to be looking for a scapegoat, someone or something to point the finger at and say, "You! It was your fault!"

SENSELESS SUN

Yet I was quite taken aback when my local newspaper bizarrely chose to blame Mother Nature.

The lead editorial in the Oct. 21 Vancouver Sun likens Mother Nature to Mommy Dearest, claims that "our culture has a history of viewing nature as benign, as the wellspring from which all good things come," and argues that "it's time to relieve ourselves of the notion that everything natural is good."

Perhaps the Sun is under the impression that its readers are infants or merely stupid, but I imagine most might have figured out that nature does not just cause the sun to shine and the birds to chirp, but also volcanoes to erupt and riverbanks to overflow.

Maybe I'm an optimist, but it seems to me that even the most slack-jawed yokel now peers just as suspiciously at the words "all natural" on a cereal box, as he might the term "cholesterol-free."

The intent of the editorial, it seems, is to remove any hint of human culpability from the disasters that have gripped the province.

SCIENTIFIC FORESIGHT

Never mind that the extreme weather events and insect infestations British Columbia has been experiencing are exactly what scientists have been telling us for years are the kind of thing we will be seeing more and more of if we don't stop pumping increasing amounts of heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere.

Instead, the editorial seeks to frame the world as "nature vs. humans" as though the two entities are fundamentally different and at odds. In such a world, whatever people do to shore up their defences against the dangers of nature could be seen as justifiable.

But such a world doesn't exist. In the real world, we are as much a part of nature as an overflowing stream or a hungry insect. In the real world, everything we have comes from nature. Viewed from space, the Earth is a blue oasis amidst a black desert. And the thin, shining veneer of biosphere around it contains all that we hold dear -- all that keeps us alive, all our loves, all our art, all our culture, all of human history. That's all the life we know of in the universe. That's it.

NEUTRAL NATURE

So the Vancouver Sun is correct in that the metaphor of Mother Nature is problematic. Although it's apt in many ways, referring to nature as our mother reinforces the idea that nature is outside of ourselves, something that will always take care of us no matter how badly we screw up.

But nature isn't like that. Nature is neither loving and caring, nor harsh and cruel. It just is. And we are a part of it. No matter how small and insignificant each of us may sometimes feel as individuals, as a group we have the power to either conserve this thin veneer of life or fritter it away.

We are all part of a giant ecological system, the knowledge of which we have only a most basic grasp. The system does not play favourites. It does not care which species thrive and which species fail. To it, 10,000 years of human civilization is a mere pittance in the planet's 4.5-billion-year history.

If we squander our opportunity to achieve something truly great as a species, it will be no one's fault but our own. And Mother Nature will simply shrug her shoulders, roll up her sleeves and start again.

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